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DE SAUSSURE'S ASCENT OF MONT BLANC

THERE exist hundreds of engravings and wood-cuts of mountain scenery, mostly by Swiss and German artists, that in point of time precede those showing de Saussure's Ascent of Mont Blanc, but none deal with mountain climbing. And inasmuch as Horace Benedict de Saussure's ascent of the mountain, *La Montagne Maudite* of innumerable stories and legends, first drew attention to mountain exploration, a pastime, if so it may be called, which was destined to have extraordinarily important results for the Alpine regions of Europe, the story pictorially told of the adventurous expedition undertaken by the Genevan professor of geology, should claim our full attention. It is interesting to note that de Saussure won his race by a short head, for had his expedition been delayed but by a short week, an English climber, Colonel Mark Beaufoy, would have secured the fame that fell to the lot of the Genevan, and August 9th, 1787, instead of August 3rd, 1787, would have been the red-letter date that witnessed the conquest of Europe's highest mountain by an amateur, by a gentilhomme-montagnard, as Saint Beuve aptly called de Saussure. His ascent, while not the first—for Jacques Balmat, the hero of Chamonix, had twice reached the top before him, first on August 8th, 1786, with the village doctor of Chamonix, Michel Gabriel Paccard, and secondly on July 5th, 1787, accompanied by two other guides—

drew the attention of the civilised world to the little hamlet that is now known so well to every lover of mountain-climbing, and alas! also to tens of thousands of make-believes who have long ago robbed it of its pristine charms.

Of Balmat's two ascents there exist no pictorial records of any kind; and the question whether he or his companion, Dr. Paccard, was the first actually to reach the top, with the equally puzzling enigma concerning the fate of the book describing his ascent which the latter was known to have written, have quite lately been set at rest by the researches made by an enthusiastic mountaineer, Mr. Henry F. Montagnier. Paccard's book, which had disappeared altogether from the ken of man, though written, had never been published.

It is perhaps hardly necessary to premise, that examined in the light of modern alpinism the pictures of de Saussure's ascent, as well as the accounts left us by these early mountaineers, appear essentially infantile, and one might say mediæval, in the lack of knowledge they display of the simplest phenomena. It seems hardly credible that they were drawn or penned not much more than a century ago. Indeed, so remote from the ken of the world was everything connected with the present playground of Europe, that even the highest peak remained nameless until the middle of the eighteenth century. The first time that the

name Mont Blanc occurs is in Peter Martel's account of the "Glacières" (he meant, of course, the "Mer de Glace"), of which the English translation was published in 1744. In the Duke of Rochefoucauld's account of his ascent of the Montanvert, which prodigious feat he achieved about that time, principally to show that the French were as courageous as the English, he writes: "To avoid tripping, which the stones along the path would have made dangerous, I was obliged to hang on to the tail of my frock-coat which one of the peasants carried slung over his shoulder." One could quote dozens of similar amusing instances out of the writings of early visitors to the Alps.

The two prints which come first in order are of fairly large size and in the originals are printed in outline on grey paper, which adds to their effectiveness. They are hand-coloured, at least one rarely, if ever, comes across two quite identical in colouration. Of the lengthy French inscription below the first the following is a translation: "Voyage of Mr. de Saussure to the top of Mont Blanc in the month of August, 1787. This celebrated Genevan physician, accompanied by the intrepid Jacques Balmat, nicknamed 'Mont Blanc,' and by seventeen other guides, ascended this famous mountain, and after a difficult and dangerous march which lasted eighteen hours, he reached the top which has an elevation of about 2,450 toises over the level of the sea. Published by Chr. de Mehel in 1790, and can be found at his address in Basle." Beneath the picture of the descent, which follows, is much the same inscription with the additional remark, "after having made on the

3rd August on the top of this famous mountain diverse interesting observations which can be found detailed in the third volume of his Voyages."

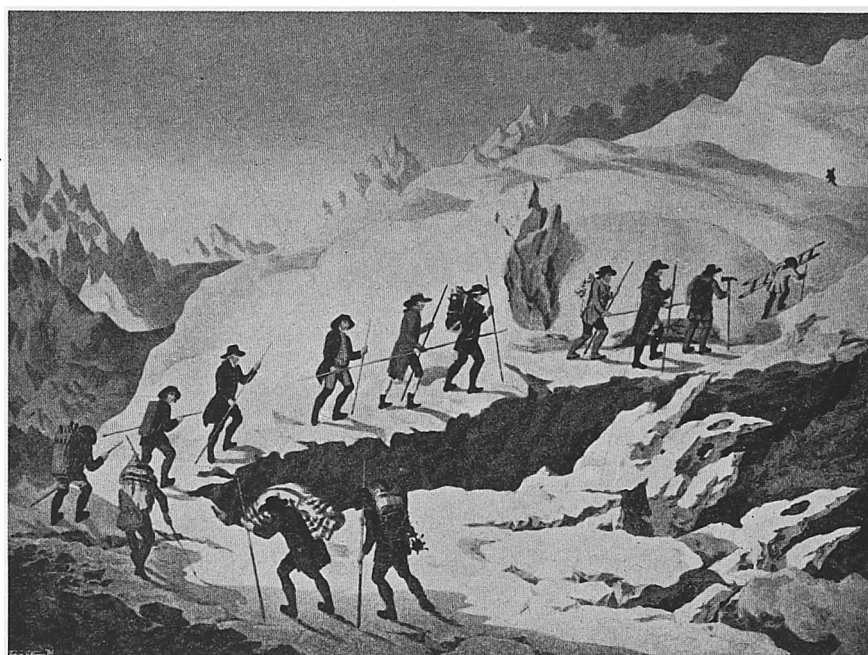
The two prints, to differentiate them from others, are called by William A. Baillie-Grohman, in his "Sport in Art," the "published Mehel prints," for there exist a few proofs of two other plates commemorating the same event. These, there is reason to believe, de Saussure caused to be suppressed because the artist represented him in a somewhat undignified attitude. Of the most interesting of these two suppressed plates the third picture is a reproduction, and of it probably not more than three or four are in existence, so that it is among the rarest of Alpine engravings. Whether de Saussure's undignified pose, sitting on the ice and being helped by two men with ropes over an absolutely dangerless cleft, was a truthful representation or an invention on the part of the artist, we can perfectly well understand that the great traveller objected to go down to posterity in such an inglorious position. The two proofs of this suppressed plate with which Baillie-Grohman is acquainted are, he says, of a beautiful finish, particularly de Saussure's face, which is of exquisite fineness; his straw hat, rosy cheeks, and white hair could not be better.

In the second suppressed plate, which is not reproduced, since it differs but triflingly, de Saussure is represented as a much older and stouter man, and his pigtail is longer, while his scarlet coat comes right down to his boots. As there are fewer features about this picture to which de Saussure could reasonably object, it was

probably the last described "descent" picture which caused the trouble, and condemned both to remain unpublished, the few existing proofs "before letters" being all that is left of them.

The not unimportant question who drew and engraved these plates, the author of "Sport in Art" finds not easy to answer with any degree of certainty, there being no fewer than five claimants for that honour. Accord-

Marquard Wocher was a quite well-known painter of Swiss scenery who had studied in Paris and became an artist of repute. As there is a striking resemblance between this signed suppressed plate and the published ones, it would seem very likely that all four were designed by Wocher, were it not for two remarks of de Saussure himself, which again raise doubts. The one occurs where he describes the con-



De Saussure's Ascent of Mont Blanc in 1787

ing to Mr. Godfrey Ellis, the owner of the best collection of Alpine prints in England, the published Mechel prints are by Bacler d'Albe, who subsequently rose to be a Baron and Brigadier-General. He painted landscapes and classical pictures. But Mr. Ellis confesses that he has nothing positive to go on. Against this ascription the following must be considered. On one of the two existing proofs of the suppressed Mechel, which is in the hands of a collector in Geneva, is the signature "Marq. Wocher illum. 1789." This

venience and security of the *barrière ambulante*, which is graphically illustrated in the first picture. It consists of "a light but strong bâton eight or ten feet long which is held by two guides, one before and the other behind, while you walk between them." "This," he adds good naturedly, "neither bores nor tires the guides in the least, and may afford support to themselves if one should happen to slip. It is in this attitude I have been represented by M. le Chevalier de Mechel in the large coloured plate that

he has engraved of our caravan." The second reference is to be found in a very rare little octavo pamphlet of thirty-nine pages, which Mechel published in 1790 to accompany his two published prints of the ascent of Mont Blanc. It is called "Relation abrégée d'un Voyage à la Cime du Mont-Blanc en Août 1787. Par M. H. B. de Saussure, Professeur émérite de Philosophie et Membre de diverses Académies. Nouvelle Edition faite pour accompagner deux Estampes enluminées qui représentent cette expédition, Publiées Par Chrétien De Mechel, Graveur et Membre de diverses Académies. A Basle MDCCXC." There under the heading "Avis de l'Auteur" we are informed by de Saussure that "these two plates which Mr. de Mechel has had engraved (vient de faire graver) to depict my voyage to Mont Blanc give a very good general idea of this expedition, of the views of this mountain, of the route, and of the attitudes of the travellers." This vient de faire graver can, of course, be taken in both senses, and, besides, it is always possible, though unlikely, that as Mechel published these prints de Saussure believed that he had also engraved them. A possible, indeed likely, explanation of Wocher's signature on the proof of the suppressed plate has been suggested; it is that he did the colouring only, the designing and engraving being done by others.

A fourth claimant to the honour of having designed these important pictures is disclosed by some correspondence communicated by M. Etienne Charavay to M. Grand-Carteret. In a letter dated 1790, the year when the prints were published, Mechel writes

from Bale to C. L. Zehender begging him "to complete as soon as ever possible his views of Mont Blanc so that he can have them at once engraved and impressions taken (pour qu'il pût les mettre immédiatement en gravure et les faire tirer,) for otherwise he cannot satisfy the demand which has arisen from every side." He also impresses upon Zehender to make "your glaciers white, very white, of a milky whiteness." Zehender was a talented Swiss artist who had studied in Paris, where he was made designer of the Duc de Chartres, but eventually returned to his mountains and became a well-known water-colour painter of Swiss scenery and historical events. It cannot be denied that from a technical point of view he might well be the designer of our set.

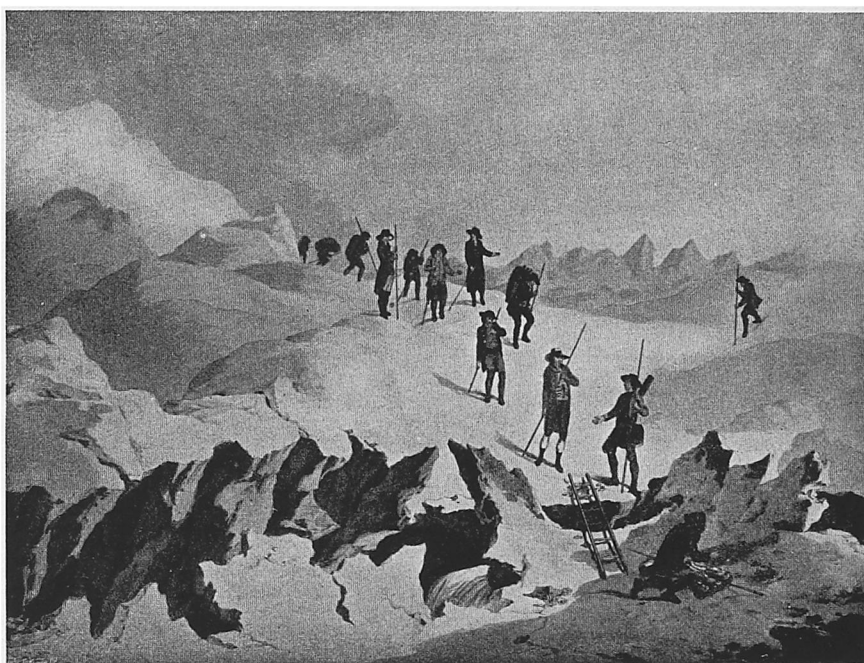
Of the fifth and last claimant, Henri L'Evêque, the designer of the Grand Géant prints, we know that he accompanied de Saussure on one of his expeditions, from the statement in the "Biographical Dictionary of Swiss Artists." Mr. Montagnier, who contends that L'Evêque drew these published Mechel prints, has given Baillie-Grohman information in support of his belief. It appears that he possesses a good water-colour copy of Mechel's published "Ascent" entitled "Beklimming van den Mont Blanc," which is signed "W. K. Mandemaker fec. naar de originele tekening van H. L'Evêque," showing that it was copied from L'Evêque's original drawing. It agrees, Mr. Montagnier states, with the Mechel print in every detail, a fact which certainly is evidence worth considering.

It is to be hoped that further research into the history of these important and

now much sought for pictures may throw definite light upon the question whether Bacler d'Albe, or Wocher, or the Chevalier de Mechel, or Zehender, or L'Evêque drew them. "The writer's efforts in this direction in the public and private collections in Switzerland, more particularly in the Library of the Zürich Polytechnicum and the Bern *Landes Bibliothek*, the two principal sources for local information, failed

to unearth any portion," as the owner obligingly informed one; and the information he gave about these prints did not go beyond what one already knew. So a wide field for enquiry into an interesting question is awaiting a de Saussure among bibliophiles."

The first of the L'Evêque set which deals with de Saussure's explorations of the Mont Blanc regions in the year following his ascent, bears the inscrip-



De Saussure's Descent of Mont Blanc

altogether to unearth proofs," writes the author already referred to. "Neither of the last-named possessed even the two published Mechel, or the two L'Evêque prints, nor had the custodians ever heard of them—a surprising avowal considering the wonderful results for Switzerland following Saussure's Alpine exploration. Mons. Charles Bastard's collection in Geneva, said to be the best of its kind in the country, was not to be seen, "it being locked up in an Alcove from which it would be a very great and long labour

tion, in French: "Mons. De Saussure, his son and his guides arriving at the Tacul Glacier at the Grand Géant where they dwelt for seventeen days under tents in July, 1788." For this expedition, according to our picture, they encumbered themselves even with a mattress, and the ladder was also not forgotten. It is noticeable that the frock-coats worn by father and son were longer than in the other set, and that pigtailed have disappeared. The provisions seem to have been of the same meagre description, with no

friendly bottles peeping invitingly from hampers, the only cooking implement being the same old coffee-mill seen in the larger prints. De Saussure mentions in his book that his eldest son ardently desired to accompany him on his successful attempt to ascend Mont Blanc, but he feared that he was not sufficiently robust, and so he was left behind to make observations at Chamonix. But a year later the youth, who, if the artist gives us a true picture of him, was a lusty enough young man, probably better able to withstand the fatigues than was his father, who was forty-seven years of age when he topped Europe's highest mountain, was allowed to accompany his parent for the seventeen-day picnic on the Col du Géant. These "1788" prints were designed and also engraved by H. L'Evêque, and are really mere outline sketches with shading washed in with colour.

What a great stir de Saussure's exploit created is shown by the number of sets of coloured as well as of uncoloured prints which were published in quick succession to commemorate the conquest of Europe's highest mountain. A word or two must be said about these sets. Although they are with only one exception practically copies of the Mechel prints, certain "improvements" of sorts were introduced here and there with an amusing freedom. Two plates designed by Grundmann and published by J. P. Lamy of Basle, Lausanne, Geneva and Bern bear the inscription "Ascent of M. de Saussure to the top of Mont Blanc in the month of August 1785" (*sic*); the second print dealing with the descent. Another pair by Volz, published by the same firm,

perpetuates the above extraordinary mistake by which de Saussure's ascent is made to ante-date Balmat and Paccard's first successful assault of the virgin peak by a full year! Another smaller set differs considerably from the much-copied Mechel originals, but inasmuch as the above 1785 mistake is repeated, Danzer who designed them and Sperli who was the engraver (they were published by Moehly and Schabelitz of Basle) cannot have known much at first hand about the scenes depicted by them. In the picture of the ascent a ladder bridges a narrow chasm, and a man, obviously intended to be de Saussure, is represented using it. In the picture of the descent a rope ladder hangs down a precipice, de Saussure is descending it, being held up by a rope which is tied round his shoulder. On the brink stands a basket from which peep six bottles.

The author of "Sport in Art" possesses an hitherto undescribed coloured plate of medium size representing the ascent differing in a few details from the Mechel plates. Unfortunately it is cut down to the margin so that there is no indication of its origin. A detail distinguishing it is that the last but one man in the file carries on his back a basket with seven bottles sticking out at the top. Another coloured variant is a small coloured plate lithographed by Kellner at Geneva. It differs in unimportant details from the Mechel picture of the ascent, and being probably the latest of all, the bottles have increased to nine from the three in the original picture! In fact the later the copies were produced the more bottles were put into the basket! Had not the dreadful Hamel accident, by which three

guides' lives were lost, occurred in 1820, causing a number of new pictorial descriptions of the dangers attached to the ascent of the great peak to be placed on the market, it is probable that a second basket full of bottles would have before long appeared on the scene.

To speak finally of the uncoloured prints which appeared mostly as book illustrations it would lead too far to give a list of them, but almost all per-

There are details in the pictures that are of interest to the climber of to-day. Many of them will naturally bring a broad smile upon his face. In the hundred and twenty-five years that have since elapsed we have learnt all there is to know about climbing, or at least we think we have. But in Jacques Balmat's day the invasion of the regions above snow-line was deemed to be beset with appalling dangers, natural as



The Suppressed Plate, De Saussure's Position Being Considered Undignified

petuate the mistake of stating that the ascent occurred in the year 1785. Indeed there are many more old prints about with the wrong date than with the right year, a condition of affairs which glaringly illustrates how easily one slip sets going an avalanche of errors. A few generations hence greater numbers and a far wider circulation enjoyed by the prints giving the wrong year will probably begin to tell, and the year 1785 may go down to posterity as the one that witnessed the conquest of the Alps.

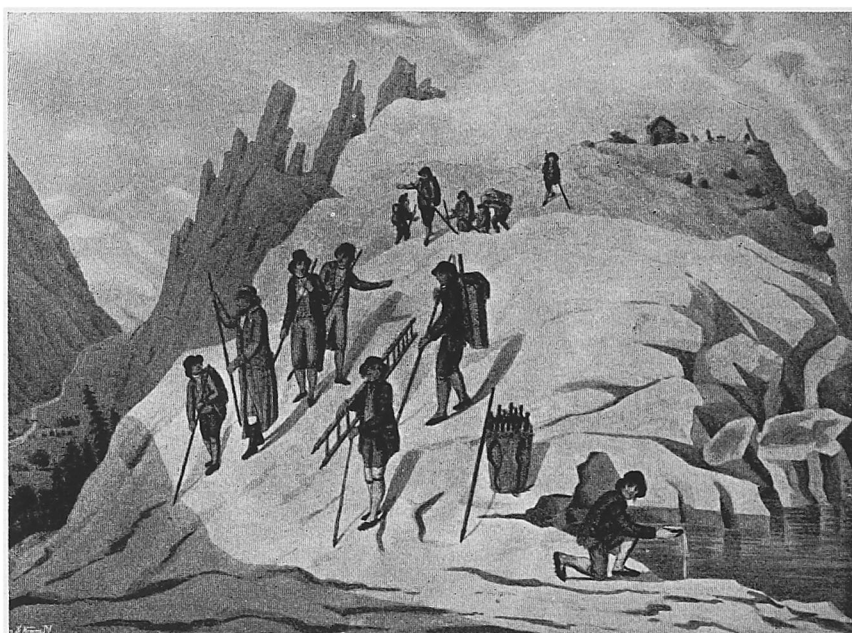
well as supernatural. Though to the native the roar of the winter-avalanche was of course a familiar sound, he had not yet learned the risks arising from the Sommer-Lavine, from crevasses hidden by snow, from stone-falls and ice-falls, from treacherous cornices, from physical exhaustion in high altitudes that invites sleep from which there is no awakening. To a man of Jacques Balmat's generation, mountain-bred though he might be, the climb to the Jardin or to some harmless Col was as riskful a proceeding as would

prove to-day the crossing at the Mansion House to that dear old son of London, Mr. Pepys. This utter lack of experience is shown in every detail in the *modus operandi* of de Saussure's caravan. Contemporaneous writers tell us that the long-tailed scarlet coat worn by de Saussure was of silk and was profusely adorned by huge buttons. He wore knee-breeches and white thread stockings; and the light boots of flimsiest make, such as he might have worn promenading on the lake-terrace in his own Geneva, lack even the crampons such as we see the guides are wearing. And what with the pig-tail, the ribbon-bedecked broad-brimmed straw hat and the parasol which, though the designer of these plates omitted it, we know he carried, good old de Saussure must have presented an unique sight as he stood victorious on the top of the great White Mountain. By the next season, if we can believe our artist L'Evêque, he had learnt his lesson, and in the 1788 pictures we see crampons on his feet, gloves are hanging from the Alpenstock that forms that farcical *barrière ambulante*, a hat of felt and of more suitable proportions is on his head, and the pigtail as well as the scarlet coat have disappeared! The complete absence of ropes which is such a noticeable feature in the published prints, the presence of only one ice-axe and of a long ladder, which latter, we are told, was de Saussure's invention, the wholly unscientific manner in which the Alpenstocke are being handled, which would infallibly bring the bearer speedily to grief, the man staggering along under a stack of bedding large enough to render the passage of even the most

harmless *mauvais pas* a matter of impossibility, the contrivance which looks uncommonly like a coffee-mill dangling from the Kracksen carried by the last man in the file, the obvious inadequacy of provisions in the one basket from which peep three forlorn bottles—a number which, by the way, does not seem to have been decreased in the course of the ascent and of two bivouacs, for in the second plate the same number peep out of the diminutive peripatetic larder—these and a number of other ludicrous details challenge amused criticism. How it came that the idea of connecting the members of the expedition by ropes had not occurred to the leaders is hard to say. A brief reference to their use is made by de Saussure where he describes the lucky escape of one of his guides. "One of my guides went overnight with two others to reconnoitre. Fortunately they took the precaution to tie themselves together with rope; the snow gave way under him in the middle of a large and deep crevasse, and he remained suspended between his two comrades. We passed close to the hole which was made under him, and I shuddered at seeing the danger he had encountered." It seems hardly possible that in view of this warning the party should have continued to court disaster in the manner depicted by the artist. In the suppressed plate there is indeed a rope, but in what an absolutely idiotic manner is it being employed! Poor de Saussure, who is evidently in difficulties, for he is squatting on the ice, would have been simply cut in two by the rope which he has round his waist, had the "rescue" taken place in the manner depicted, for while from

the top one burly guide is heaving and tugging with all his might, the other stalwart Swiss is lugging as lustily in the opposite direction! The two men looking on in horror with uplifted arms from above are evidently expecting that the worst will happen, for is not a crevasse some eighteen inches wide yawning to engulf the bold professor? We know that he escaped death on this occasion, and that not a single accident

can be taken seriously. One detail the painter certainly missed, for de Saussure mentions that in consequence of the dreadful condition in which Balmat and Dr. Paccard returned from the first ascent, his party covered their faces with black crape, thus avoiding their predecessors' fate, who came back blind, with their faces burnt, cracked and bleeding from the "reverberation des neiges"! Of such pro-



De Saussure's Exploration of the Grand Géant, 1788

marred the great expedition. A transposition of the French proverb: "Fortune est nourrice de Folie" would justly describe the extent to which kind providence protected those nineteen men against the folly of inexperience.

Were it not for de Saussure's own remark, that these pictures give "a very good general idea of this expedition and of the attitudes of the travellers," serious doubts would arise in one's mind whether the artist who drew these pictures had really seen the scenes he depicted, and whether they

tective measures our pictures fail to give the faintest indication.

There are some other pictures connected with Mont Blanc dating from the eighteenth century. F. Ch. Exchaquet made a relief of the Mont Blanc range, showing de Saussure's route, after which relief C. Mechel made an engraving more curious than correct. Another print in outline, coloured by hand, was engraved by Exchaquet after his relief in 1791. Marc-Theodore Bourrit or Bourrit designed a similar one which A. Moitte engraved. A pic-

ture of the valley of Chamonix after Schmidt Anglois was engraved about the same time by G. S. Stouder or Studer; and J. A. Link, a Genevan engraver of some renown, produced a coloured print of the Chapeau du Glacier des Bois very soon after de Saussure's expeditions, viz., in or about the year 1788. Very numerous engravings relating to Mont Blanc and other Swiss and Tyrolese peaks were issued after the Napoleonic wars; indeed, of the Gross Glockner there is a curious print in Hacquet's Travels which was published in Vienna in 1784. Hence it really takes precedence of the Mont Blanc pictures.

What the pictorial story of de Saussure's expedition reveals is success in spite of gross inexperience. "But," adds Baillie-Grohman, "let us be honest, and ask ourselves whether that disdainful curl of superior wisdom at the flagrant ignorance displayed in these pictures is quite in place on our own lips? Have not some of us, who are now old fogies, in our salad days, when our inexperience was stupendous but our hearts were light, committed quite as foolish breaches of the elementary rules, and outraged as idiotically the primary laws of mountain climbing? The writer, for one, must plead guilty of having courted disaster by conduct quite as imbecile as that at which we smile in reviewing our little gallery. When nigh upon forty years ago he and four companions as hare-brained as himself, undertook to make the first winter ascent ever achieved of any high peak in the Eastern Alps, the rash party started out quite gaily armed

only with a snow-shovel to attack the Matterhorn of Austria, an ice peak of the first order, without a single ice-axe between us five simpletons. And when on getting to the top of the lower of the lofty twin peaks, well known to us from summer ascents, we discovered instead of the sharp point, a safe-looking platform as large as a room, did we not rush to the edge, and for some minutes stand on a shallow snow-cornice that overhung an abyss of 4000 feet? A few pounds more of foolish humanity or a single step further out towards the treacherous brink, and the peaceful little cemetery of Heiligenblut nestling at the foot of the great peak would have had to house five gory objects sewn up in sacks, the manner in which the High Alps most generally lay to rest their annual toll. We five imbeciles on that 2nd January 1875 escaped, as did de Saussure and his companions. But master-peaks do not forego their tithes so lightly; and the White Mountain gathered in his when Randall and Beans' entire party of eleven perished on its slopes, while the Gross Glockner, of sterner aspect, though lower altitude, insisted as inexorably on his tribute a short time after the writer's escape. The fate that overtook the poor young scion of a great house and his four guides at the very same spot that had so nearly become fatal for us and, so far as could be discovered in a case where all perished, as a result of carelessness similar to ours in foolishly trusting to a deceptive snow-shelf, was one of those lessons the ever-alluring Alps impress upon those that sit at their feet."